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Sandinistas' 'institutional' phase begins

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MEXICO CITY — Daniel Ortega Saavedra's inauguration today as Nicaragua's president ushers in a new, "institutional" phase of the five-year-old Sandinista revolution, but leaves the nation's leadership intact.

Real decision-making power is expected to reside in the unelected, nine-member directorate of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, as it has for the past five years. Mr. Ortega is one of the nine comandantes.

The November 4 vote essentially ratified the Sandinista status quo. President-elect Ortega and Vice President-elect Sergio Ramirez Mercado have been the dominant members of Nicaragua's three-man revolutionary junta. Carlos Nunez, who will head the Sandinista-dominated Constituent Assembly, also led the Sandinista-appointed Council of State.

Mr. Ortega, a 39-year-old former guerrilla leader, was elected president with 63 percent of the vote. Six parties challenged the Sandinistas; other opponents boycotted the election.

He will face a daunting array of problems: war with rebels, financed until recently by the CIA; popular opposition to the military draft; persistent shortages of foreign currency and consumer goods, and a rift with the Catholic Church hierarchy.

Mr. Ortega says his No. 1 problem is U.S. refusal to accept the Sandinista revolution. The United States, which tried to discredit the election as a "Soviet-style sham," is reportedly about to launch a new campaign of charges that Nicaragua is engaged in an unwarranted, Soviet-backed military buildup. The Reagan administration also will attempt to persuade Congress to renew covert aid to the rebels.

U.S.-Nicaraguan talks in Mexico have shown no results, and U.S. objections to a Central American peace plan drawn up by the Contadora group — Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Panama — have slowed that process.

Sandinista sympathizers hailed the November election as a "political opening" that subjected the revolutionary government to unprecedented criticism. But key political opponents, headed by former junta member Arturo Cruz, contended that Sandinista control of the state apparatus had stacked the electoral deck.

Since the election, the opposition has charged that harassment of political dissidents has been stepped up. An editor of the opposition newspaper *La Prensa*, Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, left the country two weeks ago in despair over increased censorship.

Mr. Cruz, who expressed hope in a post-election interview that Mr. Ortega would moderate Sandinista policies, wrote last month: "I badly underestimated the vigor with which the newly elected Nicaraguan government would proceed to repress its opponents and militarize the state."

Mr. Ortega is a solemn, quiet man who looks more like a college professor than a revolutionary firebrand. But his revolutionary roots run deep. First arrested for political activities at age 15, he spent seven years in jail during the waning years of the Somoza dictatorship. One brother, Humberto, is Nicaraguan minister of defense. Another, Camilo, was killed in 1978 during the fight against Anastasio Somoza Debayle.

Considered a moderate among the nine Sandinista leaders, Mr. Ortega was chosen to be the revolution's front man partly because of his lack of charisma, according to some Sandinista-watchers. He was not viewed as a threat to seize personal power. His laconic speaking style often leads to restlessness among crowds at Sandinista rallies.